

Gautier, Thomas Nicholas Boudet ^[1]

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1764–5 Sept. 1848

Thomas Nicholas Boudet Gautier, naval officer, was born in Bristol, England, served in the Royal Navy as a midshipman, and came to America some time before 1800. From 1808 until his death at age eighty-four, he was a citizen of Wilmington ^[2], N.C.

From 1800 to 1814 Gautier made a career in the U.S. Navy ^[3], serving as commander of the North Carolina naval defenses during the War of 1812 ^[4]. Commissioned as a lieutenant in 1800, he was assigned to the *Chesapeake* in 1801 but because of ill health applied for a discharge. In 1807 he again entered the service, this time at the lower rank of sailing master, and was assigned to assist in the construction of gunboats at Wilmington. At that time the parsimony of the national government was notorious, and Gautier struggled constantly to obtain money, materials, and labor to do the job, often spending from his own pocket. When three gunboats were finally assembled, the same problems arose with obtaining crews. After three years, gunboats and crews were ready in 1811. Reported Gautier, "Sans an article of military equipment, sans money, sans officers or men, I have done as much . . . as in some places would have been done having everything at hand."

As war approached, his duties included laying buoys to protect the Wilmington bar, maintaining the embargo, and checking all ports from Swansboro to Elizabeth City. Constantly he was directed by the secretary of the navy to distribute his tiny flotilla so as to guard many miles of coast and ease citizens' fears of British invasion. To his utter dismay, in March 1813 he was ordered to call in all the gunboats and lay them up. Wrote Gautier, "I then shall sit down in sullen retirement and view the Boats in the mud and to reflect on the situation of my state not a single armed vessel allotted for her defence."

The British rudely awakened the navy by capturing Ocracoke and threatening New Bern in July 1813. Gautier was named acting lieutenant (30 Aug. 1813) and the gunboats came out of the "mud." Based at Smith's Anchorage below Wilmington, he took charge with a firm hand, especially at Beaufort where there was trouble with disaffection and smugglers. Supplies arrived from Norfolk to Elizabeth City, from which port the gunboats convoyed them to Wilmington. Five of these, plus a barge and a felucca that Gautier had converted into a schooner, constituted his fleet. He coped with hurricanes, with desertions to higher-paying privateers, with explosions, and with rumors of British invasions. In the end he resigned on 25 Nov. 1814.

Gautier had a firm sense of an officer's duty and position, undoubtedly instilled in him by the Royal Navy ^[5]. To a merchant he wrote, "I have worn a sword for 30 years and am not to be taught at this period what is allowed for, or what the Service requires." He reprimanded a subordinate for engaging in "idle conversation with the men," and accused one Captain Creighton of presuming to interfere with Gautier's naval arrangements during an absence. The sight of a sea fencible from "the backwoods" "dashing around" in a navy uniform offended him. His somewhat feisty manner irritated many persons. James Taylor wrote to Secretary of the Navy William Jones bringing "charges" against Gautier. Others accused him of enlisting prisoners and even enslaved people, which he denied. An officer who was put in irons for allowing or conniving at the desertion of four sailors spread the word that Gautier was an ogre. Undoubtedly such charges, added to his heavy duties, encouraged his resignation.

After the war, Gautier practiced as a unsuccessful businessman. His first wife, Anna Bella, was a woman of wealth who, upon her death around 1823, left her houses, lots, and the people she enslaved to be managed by executors and the income paid to her husband. Because he was in "the decline of life" and was in debt from "misfortune in mercantile transactions," she wished him to have a sufficiency with which to live. The "declining" Gautier not only lived for twenty-five years more, but remarried immediately a woman half his age. They appear to have had two daughters and one son, and to have enjoyed Anna Bella's estate and the eighteen people she enslaved. There were no heirs by his first wife.

Upon his death, "Capt." Gautier was praised as "one of our oldest citizens [who] has filled many offices of trust with honor to himself, and dies universally respected." To pay honor to his memory, ships in port flew their ensigns at half-mast for a day. A member of the Episcopal ^[6] church, he was buried in the cemetery of St. James's Church, Wilmington.

References:

Census and Wills of New Hanover County (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).

Records of the U.S. Navy (National Archives, Washington, D.C.), Tombstone, St. James's Episcopal Cemetery (Wilmington).

Wilmington Journal, 8 Sept. 1848.

Additional Resources:

Thomas N. Gautier Papers, 1789-1926 (collection no. 00273). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
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The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History. 1813. Government Printing Office, 1992. http://books.google.com/books?id=v-b7pScuxEYC&dq=Thomas+N.+Gautier&source=gbp_navlinks_s&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false [8] (accessed July 30, 2013).

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